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ABSTRACT

ARGUING THAT SLOT-CARDS TEACH THE STRUCTURE OF THE VERB AND THE GRAMMATICAL MESSAGE EACH SLOT CARRIES WHILE REDUCING THE NUMBER OF FORMS TO BE LEARNED, THE AUTHOR DESCRIBES A TECHNIQUE FOR TEACHING THE TENSE MODES OF THE PRESENT INDICATIVE, THE PRESENT SUBJUNCTIVE, AND THE PERFECT INDICATIVE IN FRENCH. A WORKING MODEL OF THE VERB STEMS "AIMER" AND "COURIR" WITH ENDINGS ILLUSTRATES THE ADVANTAGES OF THIS APPROACH TO VERB STUDY. (RL)

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SLOT-CARDS FOR THE TEACHING OF FRENCH VERBS

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The learning of tense-mode verb forms is a time-consuming chore. The purpose of this paper is to show how it may be simplified.

Colloquial French has only three simple tense-mode categories: the present indicative, the present subjunctive, and the imperfect indicative. Their forms have customarily been taught either en bloc (e.g. j'aime) or as composites of a stem and an ending. The pupil believes that the French verb has one simple part and one complex part. The complexity can be simplified by learning and teaching that the French verb has three parts.

If we consider the present indicative paradigms of aimer and courir, we observe that the singular forms are different, but the plural forms are the same. This requires us to establish two sets of endings. Almost all forms of the present subjunctive use the present indicative endings of aimer, and all forms of the imperfect indicative use the present indicative endings of courir. As another element is added in the subjunctive and in the imperfect, we will consider that those endings form a separate part of the verb, which we may call Slot III. The stem forms the first slot. Slot II is shown in the following table:

Slot I		Slot II			Slot III	
		A	B	C	A	B
aim	cour	ø	ø	ai	e	s
aim	cour	ø	ø	ai	es	s
aim	cour	ø	ø	ai	e	t
aim	cour	ø	i	i	ons	ons
aim	cour	ø	i	i	ez	ez
aim	cour	ø	ø	ai	ent	ent

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To form the present indicative, a stem of Slot I combines with zero in Slot II and the appropriate form of Slot III. The present subjunctive combines a stem with the B form of Slot II and the A form of Slot III. The imperfect indicative combines a stem with the C form of Slot II and the B form of Slot III.

Aside from the relationship between a single-stem verb and its endings, there is no perfect correspondence between other stems and other paradigms, but there are groupings which are easily learned. The verb acheter has two stems, achèt, which is used when no tonic vowel follows, and achet when one does. One display incorporating both stems is used for both the present indicative and the present subjunctive. Only the stem achet is used to teach the imperfect indicative. Verbs of the finir class, as well as sentir, lire and many others, distribute their stems differently. Stem I is fini (sen, li) stem 2 is finiss (sent, lis). The present indicative slot display uses both stems, while a second column displaying the stem finiss only, will serve for both the present subjunctive and the imperfect indicative.

Stem-slot displays can be prepared as well for three-stem verbs, like boire and prendre, as well as for highly irregular verbs, the only question being whether it be easier to prepare displays or use the chalkboard. Être, dire, avoir, aller, and faire, for example, will each require a separate display of Slot III endings in the present indicative. Être, furthermore, is irregular in the present subjunctive. This problem can be solved by using the B variant of Slot III instead of the A variant.

The teacher can display the verb slots on cardboard or stiff paper, or on transparencies to be used with an overhead projector, so that each tense and mode of each class of verb can be taught in its turn. The personal pronouns should be presented in a column to the left of the first slot. Color coding of letters is recommended, so that the students may recognize which ones are pronounced in liaison.

A useful by-product of this method is that the pupils learn that certain spelling alternations are not irregular but predictable. They combine Slot I, voi, with Slot II, ai and Slot III s, and spell the result voyais: intervocalic i, followed by a tonic syllable, becomes y. Slot I peu combines with Slot II s and results peux, because s after u (with rare exceptions) is written x. Slot I rend is combined with Slot III t to produce rend, because word-final nd has the same value as nt, and an extra t would be redundant.

However, the principal reasons for using slot cards are 1) that they teach the structure of the verb and what message each slot carries, and 2) they drastically reduce the number of forms to be learned. Where traditionally the student had to learn eighteen forms for each verb, he now has to learn a total of seventeen forms for all verbs (as person 4-6 are the same in the two variants of Slot III), plus one or more stems for each verb. The saving in effort and the gain in accuracy are considerable.